Earth Island Journal
Local News from Around the World

Can the lion lie down with the lamb?

by John Dawson

The flight into Nairobi airport is spectacular. As your plane begins its approach, look out the window at the broad grasslands of Kitengela, home to Maasai pastoralists and their livestock--you can make out the distinctive circular thorn stockades into which the cattle, sheep, and goats are herded for safety each night. In the last minutes before landing, you pass the Mbagathi River and sweep across the plains of Nairobi National Park, home to milling herds of wild animals with not a domestic creature in sight.

At least that's the theory, but life is never that simple. The Mbagathi is not a strict dividing line between the tame and the wild. Weaving through the Maasai livestock are herds of wildebeest, zebra, antelope, and other herbivores tracking the ancient dry-season migratory route northwards up the Kitengela Corridor to the very outskirts of Nairobi. And wishing them luck on their journey are the lions of Nairobi National Park.

But these days, many of the travellers are down on their luck. The herbivores have to weave past far more than the livestock as they make their way north--the human population has grown, rangeland has been fenced, and the procession of animals reaching the park has slowed to a trickle. So what then do the lions eat?

David ole Nkedianye knows. "If they don't find the zebra, they come out of the park and kill our cattle." And the Maasai have always responded in kind, knowing that a lion habituated to killing livestock is a danger to man as well as beast. As the tit-for-tat slaughter escalated, conservationists, within Kenya and internationally, became increasingly concerned. Their concern was shared by the Maasai themselves, who have always taken pride in their custodianship of the wildlife that shares their lands.

In the flames of this conflict, an unlikely partnership was forged between the local Maasai community, represented by the Kitengela Ilparakuo Landowners Association, and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). With bases in Nairobi and Addis Ababa, and with a history of research that has benefited livestock farmers throughout the world, ILRI was perfectly qualified to throw light on the problems besetting the Maasai pastoralists.

But this is not a clichéd story of a bossy international organization telling a local community what to do. It was the Maasai community that initially approached ILRI, and a genuine partnership has developed.
The partnership is personified in the figure of Nkedianye, raised in the Kitengela and now working as a community facilitator for ILRI. In 1987, he witnessed a historic change as the Maasai of his area voted to subdivide their communal lands into private plots.

The fences that sprang up as a result are a visible symbol of a community and a landscape in a state of flux. Outsiders bought property and developed the area in nontraditional ways. The increase in population (it has more than doubled in the last 10 years) and the reduction in available grazing areas have brought increasing poverty to the Maasai pastoralists, many of whom survive on an income of less than $1 a day.

Then, in 2000, the Friends of Nairobi National Park (FoNNaP) inaugurated the Wildlife Conservation Lease Programme. This program offered $4 per acre annually to landowners prepared to keep their property open for the passage of migrating wildlife.

The Maasai of the Kitengela were in a quandary. What was their land currently earning from pastoralism? Might there be other options that would pay more? What are other people in Kenya, and indeed around the world, doing in similar circumstances? Like any self-respecting entrepreneurs, they wanted to know the returns on their options.

They turned to ILRI, and so began the Reto-o-Reto Project. In the Maasai language this means "you help us and we help you."

ILRI was able to quantify the income available from the various options. And using the organization's high-resolution maps showing income levels throughout Kenya, the Maasai were able to put the options into a national context. Nkedianye, now with a degree in sociology after a spell as a teacher, applied his skills to conducting research in the local community. "I went back to university to learn more so I could help my people," he explains.

Analysis of the costs and benefits of different land-use options raised some interesting points relevant to conservation efforts around the world. One question stood out--What is the value of the wildlife component of the equation?

To the government, safari firms, and tour operators, wildlife means income. Less-tangible value is placed on East African wildlife by caring people around the world. But to the Maasai, wildlife is largely a cost. The carnivores eat their livestock, and the herbivores consume their livestock's grass. They play host to the goose that lays the golden egg, but derive little benefit from it.

Against this background, ILRI concluded that FoNNaP's offer was worthwhile. Their research showed that returns from livestock were low and unreliable, and crop farming was even less profitable. But the Wildlife Conservation Lease Programme, costing just $4 per signed-up acre per year, effectively doubled the income of the poorest households, and offered to many the opportunity to pay their largest and most important bill--school fees.

One interesting finding was that wildlife and livestock could be mutually beneficial. Constant "mowing" of the grass by certain grazers can create a "lawn" of high-quality, rapidly growing grass. As ILRI ecologist Robin Reid observes: "Conventional wisdom says that the best way to conserve wildlife is to separate it from people, but in the East African context, this thinking may be seriously flawed."

Recent events have shown that a long-term solution will not come easily. In addition to the Wildlife Conservation Lease Programme, FoNNaP set up a consolation scheme compensating those who had lost livestock to lions--$200 per cow, $35 for a goat or sheep. Unfortunately the funds for compensation ran out, and grisly news footage of dismembered lions appeared as the killings started again.

The situation has since stabilized as fresh sources of funding have restocked the compensation pot (administered by The Wildlife Foundation, which has also taken over the lease program). Still, the truce is uneasy, and the controversy rages on: can wildlife and livestock coexist? Or should the southern boundary of the Nairobi National Park be fenced, and the park stocked with wildlife like a zoo? There are some that think this is the only solution.

Perhaps the greatest long-term benefit is the empowerment of the Kitengela Maasai community. Armed with knowledge about livelihood options, improved breeding and health services for their cattle, and monitoring changes in their environment, they are in a stronger position to make informed decisions regarding their own future.

Despite occasional setbacks, the success of the Kitengela program has attracted the interest of those faced with similar conflicts around the globe. The logic behind it is simple--the best "thank you" for looking after the wildlife on your land is the money jingling in your own pocket.

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